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SUBJECT: RELIGIOUS FREEDOM FACES SETBACK IN SLOVAKIA

REF: A. 06 BRATISLAVA 862

[1](#)B. 06 BRATISLAVA 99

[1](#)1. (SBU) SUMMARY: Slovakia, which has the strictest requirements in the OSCE for registration of a religious organization, plans to tighten those requirements. Parliament is set to pass an amendment to the religious registration law changing the necessary 20,000 petition signatures from those of sympathizers to those of members of the faith. The GOS cabinet gave its support to the plan. Two main issues underlie the strict requirement: the obligation of the government to provide subsidies to registered religions and anti-Muslim undercurrent amongst the general public and government officials. The Embassy will focus its advocacy efforts on interim steps that the GOS can take to ease the logistical and administrative difficulties faced by unregistered religious groups, since a complete turnabout by the Slovaks on this issue seems unrealistic for the time being. In addition, we are focusing resources on our long-term mission goal of fostering greater tolerance for diversity in Slovak society. END SUMMARY.

RAISING THE (ALREADY TOO HIGH) THRESHOLD

[1](#)2. (U) On February 6, parliament overwhelmingly passed the first reading (of three required readings) of an amendment to change the 20,000 signatures of resident adult sympathizers for a religious organization to register to 20,000 signatures of resident adult members of that faith. Out of the 150-seat parliament, 111 voted for the amendment, 0 (zero) voted against it, and 20 abstained. The only one of the six political parties in parliament to have a party-line abstention was SMK (Party of the Hungarian Coalition), which sits in the opposition. The two other opposition parties and all three governing parties voted for the amendment, with the exception of one person each from Smer and HZDS (Movement for a Democratic Slovakia) who abstained. The draft amendment is expected to sail through parliament on its second and third readings. The second reading is planned for late March, when the next parliamentary session opens. On February 14 at the government's weekly cabinet meeting, the GOS ministers voiced their support for the amendment. The Culture Minister stated that unregistered churches still have the right to practice without registration. The Ministry of Culture is the responsible authority for reviewing religious registration applications.

[1](#)3. (U) The only government figure to oppose the onerous 20,000 signature requirement is the General Prosecutor (GP) who filed a complaint with the Constitutional Court in April 2004 that the existing threshold violated constitutional rights. At the request of the Constitutional Court, the GP submitted a more detailed claim in January 2007. However, the Constitutional Court, with a majority of judges recently appointed by the government, is unlikely to rule in the GP's favor.

WHY NOW?

14. (SBU) The impetus for increasing the barrier to religious registration appears to be the public announcement by the Muslim community that they intend to register. This announcement came shortly after the Mormons showed that a small group of people could rally 20,000 sympathizers to sign a petition in order to register (ref A). Numerous elected public officials and other public figures have expressed blatantly anti-Muslim sentiments to Emboffs in private. Publicly, they say they oppose the registration of "dangerous sects" who may be able to get enough petition signatures because "young people will sign anything."

15. (SBU) Several sources have alluded to an unwritten agreement between Smer and the Catholic Church not to open controversial issues with religious undertones. A media report indicated that in return for the Catholic Church not raising the conscientious objection law stemming from a treaty with the Vatican (an issue which brought down the previous government, ref B), the current government will support strict religious registration. The article also claimed that in return for the Catholic Church and the opposition Christian Democratic Movement (KDH) not pushing for a ban on abortion, the GOS will refrain from proposing the legalization of gay marriage. A Smer MP had described similar arrangements to Emboffs last December.

HOW LACK OF REGISTRATION HINDERS FULL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

16. (U) Religious organizations are not required to register, but Slovakia's all-or-nothing registration system means that only registered religious groups can receive the benefits of state recognition, most importantly significant subsidies.

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The other benefits, which some unregistered religious groups tell us they desire more than the subsidies, include the right to become a legal entity (and therefore have the ability to open a bank account, rent a building, etc. in the name of the religious group), open a school, offer a religion class to fill the legal requirement that all students take either religious or ethics classes, have state-recognized wedding ceremonies, have clergy visit members in prison or hospitals, participate in government-religious sector discussions, and so on. Members of unregistered religious groups are not prevented from nor persecuted for practicing their religion in Slovakia.

17. (SBU) Buoyed by the success of the Mormons but anxious about the support for the draft amendment, the Bahai community, which has a few hundred members in Slovakia, is trying to gather 20,000 signatures as soon as possible in order to register before the new law is passed. Though this religious group opened its registration application in January, the one piece of the application that is missing is a completed petition of signatures. They have called in believers from nearby countries to help gather signatures and currently have about half the required amount. It is not expected that a newly amended law would allow for a "grandfathering" of already-opened applications.

NOT LISTENING TO REASON

18. (SBU) One of the two co-sponsors of the draft amendment told Emboffs that she wanted to protect Slovaks from and preclude the state from funding dangerous religious sects and cults that hurt their own members or others. She shrugged aside all concrete examples of unregistered groups facing difficulties as one-off incidents. She told a member of one of the smaller religious communities that the unregistered religions can acquire legal entity status through the civic association law, despite the fact that that law (and the

Ministry of Interior, which administers the law) specifically denies religious organizations from registering as civic associations.

COMMENT

[19](#). (SBU) The two main factors in this negative development are the obligatory state funding of registered religions and a general anti-Muslim bias. Years of advocating for the Slovaks to lower their threshold of signatures required for registration and to consider other models of registration has produced no result. Post will now focus its advocacy on interim improvements in religious freedom, such as a system that will allow religious groups to attain some type of legal entity status with or without religious recognition. The longer-term goal of full religious freedom will remain part of the mission's strategic plan to promote greater tolerance for diversity within Slovak society.

VALLEE